

# The Great Weapons Heresy

By Thomas W. Wilson Jr.

275 pp. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company. \$5.95.

## Missile Madness

By Herbert Scoville and Robert Osborn.

Illustrated. 77 pp. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company. \$4.95.

## Arms Beyond Doubt

The Tyranny of Weapons Technology.

By Ralph E. Lapp.

210 pp. New York: Cowles Book Company. \$5.95.

By ROBERT JAY LIFTON

Preoccupied as we are these days with little bombs, we tend to forget that there are big ones around. And that those big ones have a much more fundamental hold on us, have indeed become a central object of worship in our time. We bring to The Bomb, an entity both abstract and all too concrete, attitudes characteristic of those held toward a deity. Awed by its destructive power, we feel insignificant in relation to it and view it as capable of unlimited creation as well. We then disqualify ourselves from raising questions about its continuous proliferation and absolute authority, and in fact come to depend upon it both for periodic miracles and everyday sustenance.

But this potential vulnerability. But this potential sight tends to be blunted by one-dimensional portrayals of him as either a very simple and gentle liberal hero, self-effacing and misunderstood, or as a passionate nuclearist consumed by neurosis and hubris. I believe that Oppenheimer shared war, and even exemplified our nuclear worship in our time. We bring to disorder, and was then crucified by the case of a tragic fusion took place between Oppenheimer and the evil instrument he so heroically and selflessly guided into existence, a fusion that became profoundly unsettling for him from the moment the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. When he said that physicists had known sin, I suspect he was referring not only to the external evil of Hiroshima but to this internal man-bomb fusion — a great synthesis who to physicists having lived in a state of nuclearism.

This pseudo-religion—let us call it nuclearism — is ubiquitous. The French can equate hydrogen-bombs with national grandeur; the Soviet nuclearists quest for the very biggest (100-megaton) weapon; and the Chinese nuclearists claim that

Dr. Lifton, professor of psychiatry at Yale, is the author of "Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima," and more recently, "History and Human Survival."

after a nuclear war, "On the accords of imperialism, the victorious people would create very swiftly a civilization thousands of times higher than the capitalist system and a truly beautiful future for themselves." Given man's exposure for the first time to an apocalyptic device of his own making, together with his strong impulse toward transcendence and his increasing disenchantment with traditional ways of satisfying that impulse, it seems that the yearning for nuclear grace is universal.

We are obsessed with the life and deeds of J. Robert Oppenheimer because we sense he has something to reveal to us about our spiritual

Yet his "supernatural" image was closely bound up with the bomb—without that experience Oppenheimer would have been merely a brilliant physicist with quiet charisma and one of the great teachers of his generation. At Los Alamos, however, his gifts fell into place, and he became entwined with the whole weapons project—motivated toward testing the demon, anxious that it might not work, and if not committed to its use at least wary of its nonuse.

To point out that he helped block the spread from Chicago to Los Alamos of the early scientists' rebellion against dropping the bomb without warning on an unwarmed-up

colleagues—with Leo Szilard, for instance, who also made that journey from Göttingen to Washington via Hiroshima but, unlike Oppenheimer, became a passionate opponent of developing nuclear weapons.

Oppenheimer undoubtedly shared Szilard's humane aspirations. But he had a different involvement with the bomb. In addition to his nuclearist crisis he was also undergoing a complex political shift, which began just before the war, from past romantic pro-Soviet leftism to a hard-line anti-Soviet liberalism — a

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